

Rule 3: Enclose parenthetical expressions between commas.

Parenthetical expressions provide an extra element of description to the sentence; the information in such expressions can usually be removed without damaging the meaning of the sentence. Knowing this rule can help clear up the punctuation of two grammatical structures: appositives and adjective clauses.

Usually, appositives provide parenthetical information about the noun. In the following sentence, an appositive phrase adds extra information about the father.

*My dad, **a former CIA agent,**
speaks English, French, and Thai.*

Sometimes appositives provide information essential to identifying a noun. In the following sentence, we need the appositive to know which cousin is being discussed. Hence, the word is not parenthetical and has no commas surrounding it.

*I have two cousins. My cousin **Diego**
lives in Salt Lake City these days.*

Adjective clauses nearly always begin with relative pronouns. If an adjective clause is not needed to specify a noun, it is a parenthetical expression; separate it from the sentence with commas.

*My father, **who worked for the CIA**
for many years, owns a lie detector.*

*Charlie Smith, **who used to cook for us,**
has just opened his own restaurant.*

If an adjective clause is needed to specify a person, place, or thing, it is not a parenthetical expression; do not separate it from the sentence with commas.

*The man **who opened the door**
was my uncle.*

*We saw two dogs. The dog **that had**
black spots was rolling on the ground.*

The *that* entry in Strunk and White's alphabetical listing of "Words and Expressions Commonly Misused" adds to Rule 3.

Rule 3 includes the following point:

*When the main clause of a sentence is preceded by a phrase or
a subordinate clause, use a comma to set off these elements.*

Here's an example of an initial phrase:

For three months out of the year,
we stay with my friend in Ohio.

Here's an example of a subordinate clause beginning a sentence:

Because *we needed a place to stay,*
we called my friend in the city.

After the publication of the original *Elements of Style*, some teachers simplified punctuation by developing a corollary to this rule: if a dependent clause comes at the end of the sentence, don't put a comma before it.

We called my friend in the city,
because *we needed a place to stay.*

incorrect

We called my friend in the city
because *we needed a place to stay.*

correct

Rule 4: Place a comma before a conjunction introducing an independent clause.

This rule explains how to punctuate compound sentences and compound predicates.

If each clause can stand alone, always use a comma before the coordinating conjunction; if only one clause can stand alone, never use a comma. This is a simplification that is always correct.

compound predicate:

He tried *everything,*
but succeeded *at nothing.*

He tried everything
but succeeded at nothing.

compound sentence:

He tried *everything*
but he succeeded *at nothing.*

He tried everything,
but he succeeded at nothing.

incorrect

correct